‘This is a slaughter’: Los Padres forest biologist has lost job amid Trump purge

BY STEPHANIE ZAPPELLI

Wildlife biologist Ben Vizzachero conducts a waterbird count at Hanalei National Wildlife Refuge. He lost his job at the Los Padres National Forest as part of a wave of firings ordered by the Trump administration.

Ben Vizzachero boarded a whale-watching boat on Saturday with his girlfriend, setting aside rumors that his U.S. Forest Service job was at risk so he could enjoy Valentine’s Day weekend.

Then he got a call from his supervisor.

“When I heard my supervisor’s voice, I already knew what he was going to say,” Vizzachero said. “As he said, ‘I have some bad news,’ I blurted out, ‘I’m fired.’”

So, his supervisor confirmed the worst: Vizzachero had lost a job that he loved, effective immediately.

“I felt like I was going to vomit,” he said. “A big old wave of anxiety and vertigo washed over me.”

Vizzachero, 30, lives in the Solvang area and had worked as a wildlife biologist for the Los Padres National Forest for about a year. He was one of thousands of U.S. Forest Service employees fired last weekend at the direction of President Donald Trump.

“Some people are calling it a layoff, but a layoff is done with dignity and a severance package and an exit plan,” he said. “This is a slaughter. They suddenly cut me loose with no warning and no compassion.”

Vizzachero called The Tribune from the parking lot of the unemployment office on Thursday as he coped with the prospect of searching for a new job, concerns about paying rent and the need to find new health insurance.

He grieved the loss of his work and the community he built with his co-workers, but he also warned about the impact a shrinking workforce would have on federal lands.

The Los Padres National Forest spans 1.75 million acres in Monterey, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura and Kern counties.

Every employee there supported fire management in some way — from extinguishing fire pits in abandoned campsites to removing dry brush from the forest floor. Reducing staff will delay those fire prevention projects, he said.

“Me and the people that I work with, we do what we do out of love. Love for our public land, love for the country that we call home,” Vizzachero said.

A view of land that The Wilderness Land acquired and then transferred to the United States Forest Service that is now part of the Los Padres National Forest around Trout Creek in San Luis Obispo County.

"When our staff is cut and our funding is cut, the projects that are intended to keep our communities safe are delayed and postponed, and there can be real consequences to this."

More than 2,000 employees fired from U.S. Forest Service

The U.S. Department of Agriculture fired about 2,000 "probationary, non-firefighting employees" from the U.S. Forest Service, an agency spokesperson told The Tribune on Thursday.

However Matt Brossard, a representative of the National Federation of Federal Employees, told The Tribune that more than 3,400 employees lost their jobs.

Probationary employees can be fired immediately for poor job performance, while other employees must be placed on a developmental opportunity plan with time to improve before losing their job, he said.

The powers-that-be seem to have used the probationary loophole to trim the workforce, Brossard said.

"They went after the low-hanging fruit," he said. "They're using that as an avenue to decrease the footprint of the government, which is not the right way to do it."

The issue is, most of those probationary employees were dismissed without a record of performance deficiencies, he said.

The U.S. Forest Service uses a so-called "pass or fail" system when evaluating employee performance, as employees can either receive an "unsuccessful" or "fully successful" rating on their review, Brossard said.

So far, all of the terminated employees he's spoken to earned "fully successful" scores on their evaluations.

The National Federation of Federal Employees filed a temporary restraining order in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia last week to reverse the terminations and prevent more, he said.

On Thursday, the judge denied the restraining order, he said.

As of that evening, Brossard didn't yet know the union's next steps, but he criticized the Trump administration's approach to reducing government spending.

"They're terminating the low-level workers, they're not terminating the bureaucracy that they said they were going to eliminate," Brossard said. "These aren't policy makers, these are people that clean toilets. Most of these people are field-going people who love their jobs and just want to do it."

"I think everyone can agree that there's some form of government spending that needs to be controlled," he added, but he disagreed with the approach.

Wildlife biologist fired for 'political reason,' he said

Vizzachero was one of four employees fired from the Los Padres National Forest last week, he told The Tribune.

He received his termination letter by email on Saturday at 2 p.m.

"The Agency finds, based on

your performance, that you have not demonstrated that your further employment at the Agency would be in the public interest," the letter said.

But Vizzachero had just earned a raise and accolades for his work.

Hired as a wildlife biologist in January 2024, his primary job was to ensure that U.S. Forest Service projects complied with federal laws like the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act.

When a project was proposed in the national forest — from trail maintenance to vegetation management — Vizzachero would evaluate its environmental impacts, report his findings and monitor the project as needed.

Then, in April 2024, the lead wildlife biologist died unexpectedly, and Vizzachero took over his projects.

"All of a sudden, I had to figure out how to fill his massive shoes, despite having no experience," he said. "I really stepped up, along with all of my colleagues who shouldered his workload, but I took on an unofficial leadership role."

In November, Vizzachero received a small bonus for his efforts, and on Jan. 14, he earned a raise and a promotion.

Additionally, he received a glowing review on his performance evaluation.

"When the wildlife program lead position became vacant, Ben worked even harder to take on additional responsibilities," his evaluator wrote. "Over the year he has invested time to learn the policies, apply that knowledge to requests and provide guidance to leadership. He is receptive to feedback, driven to meet deadlines and learns quickly. His hard work has been greatly appreciated!"

A view of land that The Wilderness Land acquired and then transferred to the United States Forest Service that is now part of the Los Padres National Forest around Trout Creek in San Luis Obispo County.

Vizzachero said there is no reason he should have been fired based on his performance.

"The documents that I've described make a pretty strong case that my dismissal was for part of this political reason, and not for my performance," he said.

Vizzachero was not the only Los Padres National Forest employee to lose their job.

Recreation technician Sam McAntee was fired on Feb. 13 in the middle of his work day.

"At first I thought it was a joke," McAntee said. "Then it just kind of set in — this kind of panic."

McAntee wasn't dismissed for performance reasons, he said. He lost his job because he was on a list of employees who hadn't finished their probationary period.

As a recreation technician, he maintained trails, cleaned facilities, removed overgrown vegetation, helped visitors navigate the park and doused at least 12 campfires abandoned by campers.

He said he'll miss the work.

"I love my job. It's not a job that you take because you're making money. It's a job that you take because you care about the world that you're living in," he said. "We get out there and make sure people are safe."

Shrinking staff will delay fire prevention efforts

The U.S. Department of Ag-

riculture assured The Tribune that firefighter jobs were protected. In fact, the agency plans to hire 1,000 more firefighters, a spokesperson said.

But other U.S. Forest Service employees support fire suppression, too, Vizzachero said.

Without wildlife biologists and park rangers clearing dry brush and downed trees from the forest, fires will spread more quickly and endanger both firefighters and nearby communities.

"The biggest chunk of my workload was fuel projects," he said. "I had a plan of attack and draft documents that were half-written, and now all of a sudden I'm out of the picture. And the rest of my colleagues, who already have a full workload, are scrambling trying to figure out who's going to do these projects."

With a smaller staff, "all of these projects will face delays," he said.

Retired U.S. Forest Service wildlife biologist and firefighter Kevin Cooper echoed Vizzachero's concerns.

During the recession, the U.S. Forest Service cut its staff, Cooper told The Tribune. The Los Padres National Forest hired contractors to do the work of a wildlife biologist on each project, but this process was slower and less efficient, he said.

"We stumbled along for many years," he said.

Cooper expects the U.S. Forest Service to struggle to complete necessary projects with a smaller staff.

"We're going to see some differences in the ability of the Forest (Service) to get work done," he said.

Vizzachero said the people fired from the U.S. Forest Service are essential to the safety of its operations.

"Those are the people that make sure that the trails are safe to hike on, make sure that the roads are driveable," he said. "National parks, national forests and grasslands and wildlife refuges and recreation areas — these are the things that make America great. All of us benefit from having a functional park system."